

GLADIATORS

Criminals sentenced to death could be purchased cheaply and thrown to the beasts or made to fight to the death, unarmed, in the arena. But those convicted of lesser crimes, for which the mines or deportation was the penalty, might instead go to a gladiatorial school. Slaves acquired through war or piracy were another source of recruitment, and occasionally volunteers, including Roman citizens, actually took up the gladiatorial trade. All gladiators bound themselves to their trade by an oath that laid down the severest penalties for backsliders or runaways: “to be burnt with fire, shackled with chains, beaten with rods, and killed with steel” (*ūrī, vincīrī, verberārī, ferrōque necārī*).

After thorough training in the barracks, the gladiator was ready for the arena. Successful gladiators, like chariot drivers, were popular heroes. This is an inscription from Pompeii:

The girls’ heart-throb, the Thracian Celadus, (property) of Octavius, three wins out of three.

Victorious gladiators were richly rewarded and, after a period of service, might win the wooden sword of freedom, even if slaves. Veteran gladiators could also be employed as overseers in the gladiatorial schools.

The fate of a defeated gladiator rested with the spectators. If he had won favor, the spectators might wave their handkerchiefs, and the emperor or presiding magistrate might then signal for his release. Otherwise, a turn of the thumb indicated that the fallen gladiator should speedily be killed.

**Gilded glass fragment
showing a gladiator**

Fragment of gilded glass, Rome, ca. A.D. 400



There were various classes of gladiators—these included the heavily armed Samnite with oblong shield, visored helmet, and short sword; the Thracian carrying a small round shield and curved scimitar; the *murmillo*, or *fish man*, who wore a helmet with a fish emblem on it and was armed with a sword and large shield; and the *rētiarius*, or *net man*, who was unarmed but for a great net and sharp trident. Each had his own supporters: the Emperor Titus, for example, supported the Thracians, as did Caligula. Local rivalry, too, was common, as is borne out by this inscription from Pompeii:

Luck to the people of Puteoli and all those from Nuceria; down with the Pompeians.

Such rivalry could lead to trouble, as this incident in the reign of Nero illustrates:

About this time there was a serious riot involving the people of Pompeii and Nuceria. It started with a small incident at a gladiatorial show. Insults were being exchanged, as often happens in these disorderly country towns. Abuse changed to stone-throwing, and then swords were drawn. The games were held in Pompeii and the locals came off best. Many badly wounded Nucerians were taken to their city. Many parents and children were bereaved. The Emperor ordered the Senate to inquire into the matter, and the Senate passed it on to the consuls. As a result of their report, the Senate banned Pompeii from holding any similar event for ten years.

Tacitus, *Annals* XIV.17

Gladiators were not used to fight animals (*bēstiae*) in the wild-beast hunts. For this, special fighters, *bēstiarii*, were employed. In these shows, such animals as lions, tigers, bears, bulls, hippopotami, elephants, crocodiles, deer, pigs, and even ostriches were made to fight each other or the *bēstiarii* or were driven to attack condemned criminals, who were sometimes chained or nailed to stakes. When Trajan held four months of festivities to celebrate his Dacian wars, some 10,000 gladiators and over 11,000 animals appeared in the arena over this period.

Even before the time of the emperors, we read of the provinces being scoured for animals for these shows. Caelius, in a letter to his friend Cicero, wrote:

Curio is very generous to me and has put me under an obligation; for if he had not given me the animals which had been shipped from Africa for his own games, I would not have been able to continue with mine. But, as I must go on, I should be glad if you would do your best to let me have some animals from your province—I am continually making this request.

Cicero, *Letters to His Friends* VIII.8

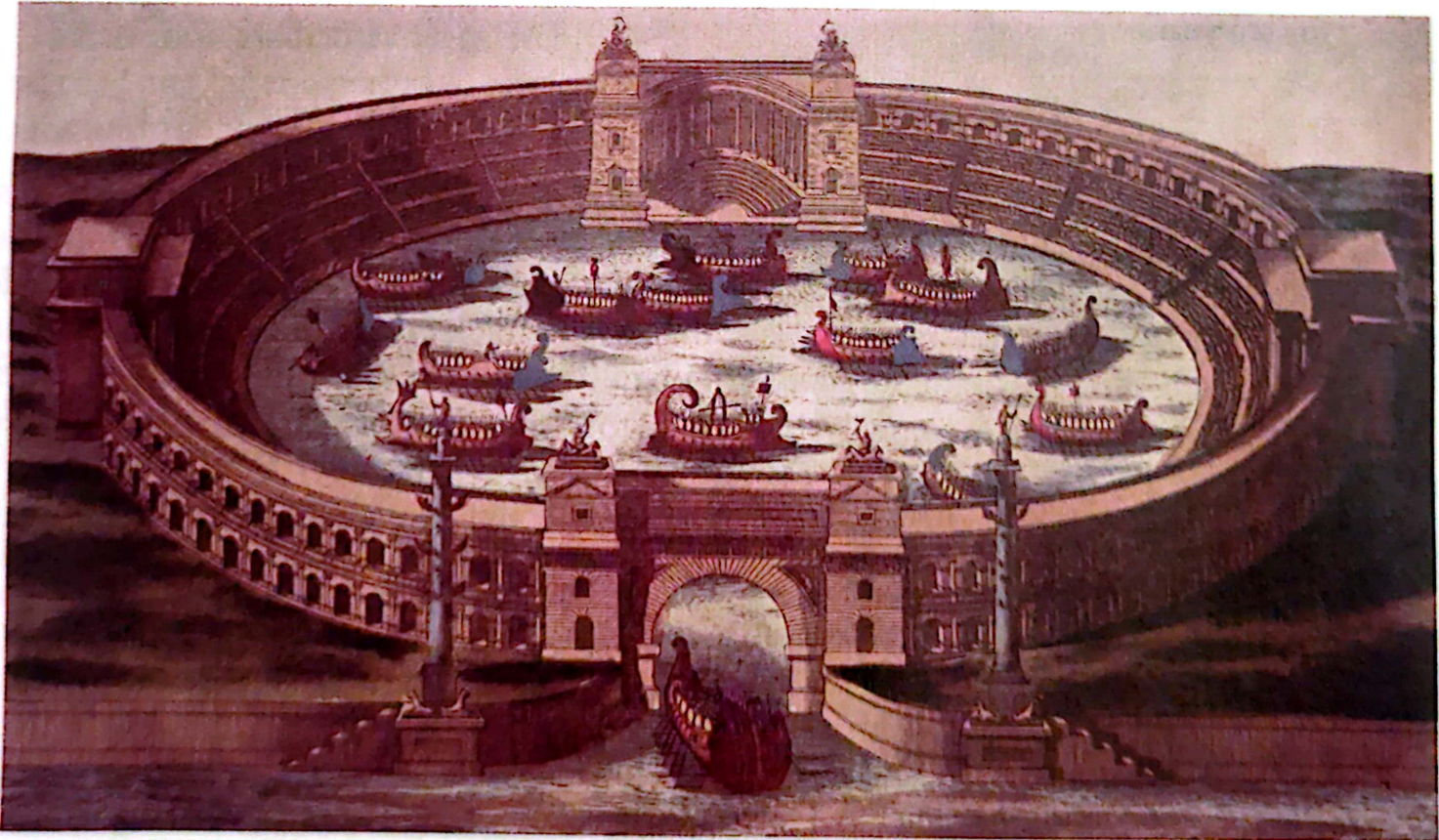
Other Shows in the Arena

While dedicating the Amphitheater, the Emperor Titus also held a sea fight (*naumachia*) on the old artificial lake of Augustus and afterward used the empty basin of the lake for still more gladiatorial bouts and a wild-beast hunt (*vēnātiō*) in which over 5,000 animals of different kinds died in a single day. His brother and imperial successor, Domitian, was not to be outdone; he even used the Amphitheater itself as a lake! Suetonius, in his life of Domitian, writes:

Domitian constantly gave lavish entertainments both in the Amphitheater and in the Circus. As well as the usual races with two-horse and four-horse chariots, he put on two battles, one with infantry and one with cavalry; he also exhibited a naval battle in his amphitheater. He gave hunts of wild beasts and gladiatorial fights at night by torchlight, and even fights between women.

He staged sea battles with almost full-sized fleets. For these he had a pool dug near the Tiber and seats built around it. He even went on watching these events in torrential rain.

Suetonius, *Domitian* 4



A nineteenth-century depiction of a *naumachia* in a Roman amphitheater
Colored copper engraving, Vienna, 1817

Graffiti and Inscriptions

Written at night on the facade of a private house in Pompeii:

D. Lucrētī Satrī Valentis flāminis Nerōnis Caesaris Aug. filī perpetuī gladiātōrum paria XX et D. Lucrētī Valentis filī glad. paria X, pug. Pompēis VI V IV III pr. Īdūs Apr. Vēnātiō legitima et vēla erunt.

Twenty pairs of gladiators provided by Decimus Lucretius Satrius Valens priest for life of Nero, son of Caesar Augustus, and ten pairs of gladiators provided by the son of Decimus Lucretius Valens, will fight at Pompeii on April 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. There will be a regular hunt and awnings.

Scratched on the columns in the peristyle of a private house in Pompeii:

Suspīrium puellārum Tr. Celadus Oct. III III.

The girls' heart-throb, the Thracian Celadus, (property) of Octavius, three wins out of three.

A curse against a **bēstiārius**:

Occīdite extermināte vulnerāte Gallicum, quem peperit Prīma, in istā hōrā in amphiteātrī corōnā. Oblīgā illī pedēs membra sēnsūs medullam; oblīgā Gallicum, quem peperit Prīma, ut neque ursum neque taurum singulīs plāgīs occīdat neque bīnīs plāgīs occīdat neque ternīs plāgīs occīdat taurum ursum; per nōmen deī vīvī omnipotentis ut perficiātis; iam iam citō citō allīdat illum ursus et vulneret illum.

Kill, destroy, wound Gallicus whom Prima bore, in this hour, in the ring of the amphitheater. Bind his feet, his limbs, his senses, his marrow; bind Gallicus whom Prima bore, so that he may slay neither bear nor bull with single blows, nor slay (them) with double blows, nor slay with triple blows bear (or) bull; in the name of the living omnipotent god (I pray) that you may accomplish (this); now, now, quickly, quickly let the bear smash him and wound him.

Sepulchral inscription of a **rētiārius**:

D. M. Vītālis invictī rētiārī, nātiōne Bataus, hic suā virtūte pariter cum adversāriō dēcidit, alacer fu. pugnīs III. Convīctor eius fēcit.

To the deified spirits of Vitalis, a net-fighter who was never beaten; a Batavian by birth, he fell together with his opponent as a result of his own valor; he was a keen (competitor) in his three fights. His messmate erected (this monument).